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CHAPTER IV

CAUSES OF THE RECENT NEGRO MIGRATION

In the study of the migration of any group or groups of mankind a consideration of its causes is highly important, because it seems that therein largely lies much of the significance of the movement. It has already been seen that for every migration there must be some definite cause, since man always moves in response to a rational impulse. Moreover, we saw that the cause must be a very powerful one, because it is the tendency of men to become attached to the locality in which they find themselves. In the investigation of this particular movement under consideration, we are, therefore, justified in seeking to know its causes; and this seems the more legitimate because we desire greatly to know why it was that at this particular time, perhaps more, or, at least, as many Negroes left their Southern homes for points in the North and West than did through a series of migrations which had been in progress for forty years.

The fundamental and immediate cause of this Negro exodus is economic, the basic and predominant cause of most of the movements of modern times. Its sudden occasion had its origin in the great labor shortage at the North, which was due to conditions growing out of the European War. This great war had the effect of cutting off the large and accustomed immigration stream from Europe and of withdrawing from this country thousands of foreign-born residents who were needed in the service of their respective native lands. Northern employers who had been dependent on them for their labor soon faced a serious shortage of labor, on the one hand, while, on the other, they saw their contracts with European concerns for war supplies increase tremendously. Being hard pressed for labor, these owners and operators of the various industrial enterprises,

as a last resort, turned to the South and began to solicit Negro labor in order to meet their demands. Thus a Negro exodus from the South was started, and we say that the cause of it was economic. This statement, however, does not adequately cover the ground, because, as has already been seen, a migration is usually the result of the operation of a complexity of causes and not the result of any one cause. Therefore, we shall say that this Negro movement was due to the workings of a complication of economic and social causes, but that of these causes the economic were overwhelmingly predominant.

In studying the forces or causes which were behind this movement, we find that they group themselves under two categories, namely, attractive and repellent. In this migration the Negroes were to a large extent both drawn and driven to break the ties which bound them to their respective localities. One has said that these causes may be grouped as beckoning and driving causes, the former arising from conditions in the North and the latter from conditions in the South.⁵⁹ The beckoning causes are as follows: high wages, little or no employment, a shorter working day than on the farm, less political and social discrimination than in the South, better educational facilities, and the lure of the city.⁶⁰ On the other hand, we have these given as the driving causes: "General dissatisfaction with conditions, ravages of boll-weevil, floods, change of crop system, low wages, poor houses on plantations, inadequate school facilities, unsatisfactory crop settlements, rough treatment, cruelty of the law officers, unfairness in courts, lynching, the desire for travel, labor agents, the Negro press, letters from friends in the North, and finally advice of white friends in the South, where crops had failed."⁶¹ At this juncture a specific consideration of these latter causes as they were operative in three of the Southern States will now be made. These States referred to are those which

⁵⁹ Scroggs, W. O., *Jour. Pol. Econ.*, 25: 1040-41, Dec., 1917.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 1040-41.

⁶¹ Dillard, J. H., Rep. U. S. Dept. of Lab., *Negro Migration*, pp. 11-12.

were foremost in contributing to the movement and are, namely, Alabama, Georgia and Mississippi.

The causes of migration from Alabama⁶² were in the main economic. In the first place the opportunities afforded Negroes to earn their subsistence were greatly curtailed by the boll-weevil pest which swept over the State a few years ago. In the black belt counties cotton had been for several generations the sole crop, and its cultivation wholly dependent upon Negro labor. On the other hand, the Negroes were dependent upon the landowners or overseers for money for their subsistence. In the meantime the Negro farmers and laborers were never taught or encouraged to raise any crop other than cotton. When the boll-weevil pest came and made the raising of cotton an impossibility, it became necessary to shift from the cotton crop to another which was not liable to be troubled by the weevil pests. While the transition was being made, however, the prices of cotton fell considerably and thus made it very difficult for landowners and Negro farmers to borrow money at a reasonable rate of interest. The outcome was that the Negroes suffered much in their struggle to maintain themselves.

Secondly, in 1916 there was a serious crop shortage due to floods. During the spring and summer of that year the rivers overflowed their banks and the water therefrom destroyed the crops throughout a large portion of the state. This made it necessary for both farmers and tenants to find other means of livelihood. The customary advances in money and provisions to the Negro tenants were cut off and in many cases the owners of large plantations were compelled to advise their Negro laborers to move away. In other cases Negroes were so deeply in debt for provisions furnished them during the past winter, for rent and other causes that they were forced to forfeit their mules and other property in payment of these debts. These conditions brought on so much suffering among the Negroes

⁶² Dillard, J. H., Rep. U. S. Dept of Lab., *Negro Migration*, pp. 58-66, Snively, T. R.

that some sunk to the depths of starvation and had to be given food by the Federal Government, through the Department of Agriculture, and also by the Red Cross organization.

In the next place, shortage of railroad cars was another prominent factor in causing migration from this State. Officials of railroad companies reported that fully half the miners who left the Birmingham districts did so because the companies were unable to obtain cars. In June, 1917, the chairman of the Birmingham District Subcommittee on Car Service stated that more than 7,000 cars of manufactured products had accumulated for shipment in the district.⁶³ Also, certain lumber companies were forced to reduce the number of their employees on account of the impossibility of getting their lumber products removed from the yards. The shortage of cars, therefore, necessitated the discharge of many men and at the same time prevented the employment of additional laborers.

There was, moreover, a great demand for labor in the North, rendered effective by offers of higher wages than those paid in Alabama. There was at this time too a great surplus of labor throughout those sections affected by the boll-weevil, floods, and shortage of cars, which was ready to respond to this demand. This demand was made known to the migrants by Northern labor agents who played the part of middlemen in this exodus. The migration, through them, was made easy by the furnishing of free transportation and by the making of glowing promises to the Negro migrants.

Another potent influence was that of the persuasion of friends and relatives already in the North. In 1917, when an investigation of the movement was made, it was found that this was the principal influence operating to move the Negroes to the North. Former residents of some of the rural districts of the South who had gone North and secured a foothold wrote letters back to their friends and

⁶³ Snavely, T. R., *Negro Migration in 1916-17*, Rep. U. S. Dept. Lab., pp. 58-66.

relatives telling them of their success in the new environment. They depicted in these missives wages which seemed fabulous sums when compared with those received in the South, told of the good conditions of their surroundings, and of numerous advantages and opportunities which they were enjoying, but which had been impossible for them to enjoy while in the South. Negro men, moreover, frequently sent large sums of money to transport their families to the North, and frequently sons in the North sent neat sums back to their parents in the South. These letters containing glowing reports concerning Northern conditions, and the large remittances to relatives and friends, played no small part in inducing thousands to move to try their fortunes in the new environment.

In Georgia⁶⁴ we find that the migration was due to a complex of economic and social causes in the form of low wages, poor conditions of labor, lynching, minor injustices in the courts and dissatisfaction with educational facilities. In regard to the first cause, it is known that at the time of the migration wages in this State were extremely low. In 1916 some counties paid only \$10 and \$12 a month for farm labor; others paid \$13 and \$15 a month for the same kind of labor. After the movement got well started, however, there was a tendency on the part of most of the farmers to advance wages a little, so that some counties showed an average of \$14, others \$17, and not a few others as much as \$20 a month. It should be added that these wages were in most cases supplemented by free housing and sometimes by food.

In another instance it was found that many Negroes left the farming districts because of unsatisfactory labor conditions due to failure on the part of the planters to keep in close touch with their laborers. There was utter neglect on their part to look after certain details of plantation life as they particularly affected the single men. For example, in many cases, no provision was made to

⁶⁴ Woofeter, T. J., Jr., *Negro Migration in 1916-17*, U. S. Dept. Lab., pp. 86-89.

have their food properly cooked, their clothes mended, to keep them supplied with fresh meat, to repair the houses in which they lived, and to furnish them with gardens. On the other hand, it was noted that those planters who carefully looked after these details had no difficulty in holding their laborers.

In regard to lynching as a cause of migration from Georgia, it is not easy to state exactly its effect on the movement, because the lynchings which occurred immediately before and during the migration were in the boll-weevil section where the economic conditions were also at their worst. Nevertheless, several planters whose premises were crossed by lynching parties held that their losses in regard to labor were heavier than those of the surrounding plantations because of the state of terror into which their tenants had been thrown by these lawless bands. In two instances occurring respectively in 1915 and 1916, in the boll-weevil section of this State, moreover, lynching parties killed not only the guilty Negroes but also others who were innocent. In another instance the mob, after murdering the criminal and terribly beating and terrorizing many others not implicated in the crime, proceeded across the county and killed the mother and another relative of the accused. These bloody deeds had the effect of developing in the Negroes a feeling of insecurity of life and thus caused them to seek the North as a place of refuge.

Another reason why Negroes left Georgia was the resentment of the minor injustices done to them in the courts. In this State, and in a number of others as well, there prevails a system whereby the county and police officials are compensated by a fee for their services, that is, they are paid so much a head for every man they arrest. The effect of this system is to render these officials overzealous in rounding up Negroes for gambling, drinking and other petty infractions of the law. As punishment for these small violations of the law Negroes are usually sentenced

to work on the county roads for certain periods of time. In the rural districts where recreational facilities are wretchedly poor, Negroes feel themselves justified in indulging in these things as means of amusement and, therefore, when they are arbitrarily arrested and severely punished therefor, they feel that gross injustice has been done to them.

The poor educational facilities in Georgia, furthermore, were a source of dissatisfaction which caused many to leave. A recent report on the educational conditions in the State showed that the per capita expenditure in public school teachers' salaries for each white child between six and fourteen years of age is about six times the per capita expenditure for each Negro child between the same ages. It is also a fact that up to 1917 the only provision made by the State for agricultural, industrial, high and normal schools was an appropriation of \$8,000 as an aid to the Georgia State Agricultural and Mechanical School, which is largely supported by Federal funds. The Negro teachers, moreover, are poorly trained and their salaries are unusually small.⁶⁵

The causes for Negro migration from Mississippi⁶⁶ are significant. In the first place, there was in southeast and east Mississippi a lack of capital for carrying labor through the fall and early winter until time to start a new crop. This lack of capital was brought about by one or more of three causes, namely, a succession of short crops, the more recent advent of the boll-weevil, and a destructive storm in the summer of 1916. In the second place, there was a reorganization of agriculture behind the boll-weevil ravage, which required a smaller number of laborers a hundred acres. In the next place, migration was due to the hunger wages paid in this State. The wages ranged from seventy-five cents on farms in the southwest to one dollar or one dollar and a quarter a day in northern counties. These were wholly inadequate to maintain the Negro laborers in

⁶⁵ Woofter, T. J., Jr., *Negro Migration in 1916-17*, U. S. Dept. Lab., pp. 86-89.

⁶⁶ Leavell, R. H., *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

a high state of physical efficiency. The attractions of the Northern urban and industrial centers too were also causes of the movement from Mississippi. These attractions were of two kinds, namely, (1) decidedly higher wages for unskilled labor, and (2) better living conditions, such as housing, which seemed superior to the rough cabins of Southern plantations, better chances of obtaining justice in the courts in cases where both whites and Negroes were involved, better schools than Mississippi afforded, and equality of treatment in public conveyances such as street cars and railway trains.

In the foregoing pages we have noted the causes of the migration from three of the Southern States. Here we desire to pursue this line of thought a bit farther, though, we hope, not at the risk of monotony, in order to emphasize these causes in such a manner as to give an impression of what was in general back of this movement from all the states involved. In this regard we are to be guided by the testimonies of Mr. W. T. B. Williams, who, under the direction of the U. S. Department of Labor, made a general survey of the conditions which gave rise to this Negro exodus.

One cause of the migration which seemed to have been general was low wages. Small pay was indeed one of the leading grievances of the Negroes. Up to 1917 on Southern farms common laborers received from fifty cents to seventy-five cents, and rarely a dollar, a day. The wages for women and children were thirty-five and forty cents a day. It is true, in some instances, meals were given with these wages, but oftener this was not the case. The following examples are typical of the wages for common laborers in such industries as saw-mills and cotton oil mills:

Newbern, N. C.	\$1.00 to \$1.50, ⁶⁷
Americus, Ga.	1.25
Jackson, Miss.	1.25 to 1.75.
Laurel, Miss.	1.65 to 2.00.
Hattiesburg, Miss.	1.40 to 1.65.

⁶⁷ Williams, W. T. B., *Negro Migration in 1916-17*, Rep. U. S. Dept. Lab., p. 103.

There were, moreover, serious unsatisfactory farming conditions which did much to drive the Negroes from the South.⁶⁸ One of these was the injustice done to tenants by their landlords. The custom was for the tenant to furnish the stock, plant, cultivate and gather the crop, and to receive in return one-half of everything, except the cotton seed, which was by far the most important part of the crop, and of which he received nothing. When the crop was made the tenant could not sell it, because the law of the State gave only the landlord a clear title to any cotton which was sold. In order to hold the Negro to the land the landlord often employed this legal advantage by selling the whole crop and refusing to settle with the Negro till late in the spring, when the next crop had been well started. Then, the Negro was well attached to the farm and was forced to accept anything or any terms which the landlord chose to offer. In some cases Negroes dared not ask any settlement for fear of bringing down upon them the wrath of their landlords. In other instances often the landlords made no settlement and arbitrarily dismissed the whole matter by telling the Negroes that they were in debt.

Another general grievance growing out of unsatisfactory farming conditions was the exorbitant rates of interest charged Negro farmers by merchants and planters for money borrowed to aid them in raising their crops. The system of lending sums of money was thus: The tenant would contract for a money loan from the first of January, but he received no money till the first of March and none after the first of August. Notwithstanding this, the Negro tenant was compelled to pay interest on the whole amount borrowed for the entire year and sometimes even for the extra months up to the time of the deferred settlement. This practice became so common and so obnoxious that the Comptroller of the Treasury of the United States declared to the Southern banks that it was usury and threatened the

⁶⁸ What will be said from this point on through the remainder of this chapter will be based largely on information taken from the preceding reference, pp. 100-111.

closing of these banks if this practice was continued. That this practice was a fact and had been long-standing the words of a prominent Southern man will show. "There is money in farming," says he, "lots of it, but the Negro farmer has been systematically robbed by the white man since the close of the Civil War. If the Negro farmers were to be returned all the interest in excess of 8 per cent charged them for money advanced them they would to-day be living in brownstone mansions, just as the rich white advancers do."⁶⁹

Rough and cruel treatment of Negroes by whites, moreover, was also an important driving cause behind the recent exodus from the South. It is reported that this sort of treatment was meted out to Negroes in many of the small towns and villages; but it was more prevalent and worse on the farms and plantations. On the latter, especially in the lower part of the South, the beating or flogging of laborers was such a common occurrence that these places came to be considered veritable peon camps. Besides, in many of the saw-mill establishments overseers and bosses were accustomed to knock Negroes around with pieces of timber or anything else that happened to be within their reach at the needy time. This brought on much dissatisfaction and caused the Negroes to become determined to leave at their first opportunity.

Furthermore, the Negro press was a very influential factor in aiding the movement. This, however, was not a general thing, because most of the Negro publications, for various reasons, either remained silent or spoke only in a very feeble manner concerning the exodus. Two of these publications, nevertheless, were very outspoken on the whole matter, in that they urged the Negroes to leave the South by all means. The principal one of these was edited in Chicago and its appeal was made to the most lowly class of Negroes. During 1916 its circulation increased manifold, and in some sections its work in stimulating the move-

⁶⁹ Robertson, W. T., Mayor of Montgomery, Ala., *Contemp. Rev.*, 114: 300, Sept., 1918.

ment, perhaps, had more effect than that of all the labor agents put together. Knowing well the mental outfit of this class of Negroes, it pursued the policy of summing up the troubles and grievances of the Negroes, of constantly keeping them in the forefront, and of pointing out the way of escape from this unpleasant state of affairs. It continually emphasized in the most convincing ways the great advantages and opportunities which were awaiting the Negroes who would go North, and consistently omitted to mention any of the possible disadvantages that might be encountered in the new environment.

It must be noted, moreover, that a good deal of mere sentimentalism or irrational selection had much to do with the movement of many Negroes from the South. "The unusual amounts of money coming in," says an observer, "the glowing accounts from the North, and the excitement and stir of great crowds leaving, work upon the feelings of many Negroes. They pull up and follow the crowd almost without a reason. They are stampeded into action. This accounts in large part for the apparently unreasonable doings of many who give up good positions or sacrifice valuable property and good business to go North. There are also Negroes of all classes who profoundly believe that God has opened the way for them out of the restrictions and oppressions that beset them on every hand in the South; moving out is an expression of their faith."⁷⁰

In addition to these causes already given, we could enter into a discussion of the certain unsatisfactory conditions which undoubtedly had some effect on the migration. These are poor housing, inadequate street improvement, poor sewerage, water, and light facilities, exclusion from public parks, and segregating regulations.

⁷⁰ Williams, W. T. B., *Negro Migration in 1916-17*, Rep. U. S. Dept. Lab., p. 101.